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Bones, Frogs, and Killers: The Corporeal Oppression of Women in the Patriarchal, Christian South

Shawna F. Felkins
Western Kentucky University, Shawna.Felkins194@topper.wku.edu

BONES, FROGS, AND KILLERS:
THE CORPOREAL OPPRESSION OF WOMEN
IN THE PATRIARCHAL, CHRISTIAN SOUTH

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By

Shawna F. Felkins

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Western Kentucky University
2013

CE/T Committee:

Professor Nikolai Endres, Advisor

Professor Wes Berry

Professor Elizabeth Gish

Approved by

_____
Advisor
Department of English

ABSTRACT

Both Alice Walker and Dorothy Allison create female protagonists who face corporeal oppression in their works *The Color Purple* and *Bastard out of Carolina*, respectively. It these protagonist's feminine gender that allows the men in their lives to control them. Connecting these two authors and validating there assertions of the power of patriarchy to oppress women through the physical body, is author Lillian Smith and her work *Killers of the Dream*. There is a connecting thread running through these works that explains the reign of patriarchal oppression in the South: Christianity. Women, especially those in the Christian culture of the South, are oppressed in many ways, but are oppressed most fundamentally by their physical bodies. Smith, Allison, and Walker present stories of a reclaiming of the body. They explore the subversive power the female body possesses demonstrating the capability of women to find a means of retaliation through their bodies, a theory posited by philosopher Elizabeth Grosz in her work *Volatile Bodies*. Grosz's theory presents a new lens to examine these southern works and their contributions to both the Southern and feminist canon.

Keywords: Dorothy Allison, Alice Walker, Lillian Smith, Elizabeth Grosz, Corporeal, Oppression, Patriarchy, Christianity

Dedicated to my brother

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VITA

July 23, 1991.....Born - Glasgow, Kentucky

2009.....Barren County High School, Glasgow, Kentucky

2010.....Paper Presentation, Sigma Tau Delta,
St. Louis, Missouri

2011.....Paper Presentation, Sigma Tau Delta,
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

2012.....Paper Presentation, Sigma Tau Delta,
New Orleans, Louisiana

2012.....Paper Presentation, WKU Undergraduate Research
Conference, Bowling Green, Kentucky

2013.....Paper Presentation, WKU Undergraduate Research
Conference, Bowling Green, Kentucky

2013.....Acceptance to MA Program in Southern Studies at
University of Mississippi

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: English

Minor Field: Women's Studies

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Both Alice Walker and Dorothy Allison create female protagonists who face corporeal oppression in their works *The Color Purple* and *Bastard out of Carolina*, respectively. It these protagonist's feminine gender that allows the men in their lives to control them. Connecting these two authors and validating there assertions of the power of patriarchy to oppress women through the physical body, is author Lillian Smith and her work *Killers of the Dream*. There is a connecting thread running through these works that explains the reign of patriarchal oppression in the South: Christianity. Women, especially those in the Christian culture of the South, are oppressed in many ways, but are oppressed most fundamentally by their physical bodies. Smith, Allison, and Walker present stories of a reclaiming of the body. They explore the subversive power the female body possesses demonstrating the capability of women to find a means of retaliation through their bodies.

Marilyn Frye describes the outside forces that oppress the female body and how it changes them internally: "The root of the word 'oppression' is the element 'press'... Something pressed is something caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the thing's motion or mobility. Mold. Immobilize. Reduce" (1). Frye's model of oppression relies on the fact that it is not individual forces that keep people oppressed, but rather the combinations of

many forces that make oppression such a hard force to battle. For the women in these works, there are many forces they must fight: race, class, sexuality, Christianity, and their biological female bodies. Each of the women in the works of fiction must deal with physical abuse at the hands of a patriarchal system. Their biological differences set them up for failure in a world where women are placed in a position of inferiority from the time of birth. It takes a reclaiming of their bodies for them to finally set themselves free from their oppressors and find empowerment and happiness in their physicality.

Elizabeth Grosz focuses on this reclaiming of the female body in her philosophical work *Volatile Bodies*. Grosz formulates a new wave of feminism that would focus the feminist agenda on breaking down the most innately oppressive force that women are faced with: the female body. Through a reclaiming of patriarchy's main source of power over women (through the oppression that begins at birth biologically by placing females in the gender role of woman), women will have a chance to eliminate the oppression at the source. When used as a framework to approach these novels, her work presents a unique opportunity to examine the heroine's actions from the perspective of corporeal feminism. By applying Grosz's theory to these works, there is hope that through reclaiming the body through sexuality, women may have gained a tool to break down the oppressive system of patriarchy that allows each of these characters to be abused because of their status as property. In her work, Grosz seems to offer women a chance to reclaim their bodies and remove themselves from the system of oppression, and each of these authors have created characters that are best understood through their individual reclaiming of themselves.

CHAPTER 2

CELIE'S RECLAIMING OF HER GOD AND HER BODY IN *THE COLOR PURPLE*

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* tells the story of Celie, living in the deep South, and the unbreakable bond with her sister Nettie, a missionary in Africa. The novel is constructed in epistle form, presenting the reader with an unique recounting of the action. Walker explores the complexity of human emotion when facing seemingly insurmountable odds, the strength of family in the separation of the two women, and the oppressive nature of a racist, patriarchal, and religious South. The novel focuses on the struggles of the two sisters and the relationships each create in their respective worlds. Through her masterful storytelling, Walker weaves an enthralling tale and presents the reader with an opportunity to follow Nettie and Celie on a journey of growth and escape--escape from the oppression placed upon them by society and circumstance.

Walker weaves the theme of oppression throughout the novel—oppression based out of race, gender and class. These forms of oppression are strongest when compounded, forming layers of hardship that serve to keep the characters in a place of servitude and poverty. Celie's first letters are to God and introduce the reader to the hardships Celie has faced in childhood. Next, Celie describes her struggles in her marriage where her place in the home is comparable to that of a slave: fixing the meals, taking care of the children and home, and being available for the sexual appetites of the master. Her place in the

marriage is a class struggle. As a poor, black wife, Celie occupies the lowest rung on the ladder and is therefore faced with immeasurable hardships that keep her in her place. It is only through her friendship with Shug—Albert's mistress—that Celie finds the strength to rebel against the restrictions placed upon her. Shug is a catalyst that drives the action forward and causes the character development of Celie: "Shug Avery is the embodiment of paradox. She's loved and hated equally, she is bisexual, she displays moments of immense sacredness matched by an equal force of profanity, the ultimate symbol of the liminal..." (McKever-Floyd 429). Shug defies the confines of the patriarchal world because she is exotic, "the other." While she is seen as traditionally beautiful from a male perspective, she is completely independent of men and seeks affirmation in her career. Her love for Celie is both romantic and maternal: she gives Celie the tools to build herself up from a fragile state and gives her real intimate love in the process. Shug also participates as a catalyst for the changes that occur in Albert throughout the novel. She reprimands Albert for beating Celie, after realizing that he beats Celie because she is not Shug. Through serving as Celie's safe harbor, Shug gives Albert the chance to see Celie as more than a slave and to appreciate her for the thankless work she had accomplished silently, without complaint, for the majority of their marriage. It is their respective relationships with the beautiful singer and her unrequited love that brings Albert and Celie to an understanding of each other and the hardship of loving such a transient woman.

Celie must suffer through all of these forms of oppression, but it is the oppression based out of her physical body that is perhaps the most destructive. Celie must endure repeated sexual abuse from her step-father, culminating in two pregnancies. Reproduction

is used as a punishment for Celie to keep her complacent. Her conception of both children are an accidental consequence of her sexual abuse, ultimately leaving her unable to bear anymore children. Her step-father further exerts his dominance by selling Celie's children, removing the only positive thing she felt happened from her abuse.

Once Albert comes calling for Nettie's hand, their step-father gives him Celie instead, reducing her to the status of livestock. Albert makes it clear that he never wanted Celie because he considered her unattractive. Celie struggles with oppression because of her class. She is never given a real education because of her lower-class origins. She is also incapable of removing herself from her abusive situation due to her lack of skills. All of these wires combine to form Celie's oppression and keep her complacent: "......she is left at the bottom of the traditional world's pecking order, as she is black, poor, female, and unattractive. Her resulting low self-esteem paralyzes her making her a pawn...to the ubiquitous patriarchy that manifests itself both familially and spiritually" (Hankison 323). It is only through her acquisition of her step-father's lands and the financial support of Shug that Celie is able to make a living for herself by creating and selling pants, resulting in her own independence.

Celie is unable to escape the pervasive power of patriarchy as her physical body is tied to her worth, a worth deemed as relatively low when compared to other females who better meet the male definition of beauty. Celie's failure as an unattractive woman decides her lower class status with the men in her life, and her inability to earn a living for herself as a black Southern woman, in a white patriarchal world make her completely reliant on her abusers. It is not until she begins to redefine herself as something separate from the male world, that she is truly able to find self-reliance in the manufacture of

traditionally masculine pants. It is only then that Celie is truly free. She no longer relies on the financial or emotional support of others creating a new place for herself, and forging a new understanding of Albert and the life they shared.

Celie's dependence on Albert and Shug is a microcosm of the reliance of black Southerners on white Southerners for survival. Celie's step-father only becomes successful after forging alliances with the other white farmers. Celie breaks her reliance on Albert through cursing him for the abuse she suffered in their marriage: "I curse you...until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail...Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice...the jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot" (209). With this quote Celie shakes off the years of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse she suffered by finding her voice. With this condemnation of Albert's abuse of power, Celie breaks the first wire keeping her from her independence and happiness.

Celie is further oppressed in her marriage through Albert's use of her as a sexual object. She is never an active participant, staring at the ceiling while he claimed ownership of her body through rape. It is only through the reclaiming of her physical body that Celie is able to end her oppression. Celie does this, with the help of Shug, through the discovery of her sexuality. Celie finally declares her lesbianism to Albert, explaining her lack of sexual attraction: "I blow my nose. Take off they pants, I say, men look like frogs to me. No matter how you kiss 'em, as far as I'm concern, frogs is what they stay" (258). By realizing her true feelings for Shug and the exploration of her own body, Celie takes the power away from Albert and gives herself a voice. With her newfound voice and independence, Celie makes the decision to leave Albert, finally escaping the cycle of oppression.

All of the major characters experience oppression because of their place in the racial hierarchy of the South. Harpo identifies the racial divide, and recognizes the oppression that comes with his skin color when discussing Independence Day with Celie: "White people busy celebrating they independence from England July 4th, say Harpo, so most black folks don't have to work. Us can spend the day celebrating each other" (293). He recognizes that celebration of freedom for white people is not a celebration of freedom for the ancestors of slaves, but rather a reminder of their inability to escape the oppression of their skin color, because of the system put into place by the white landowners to keep them impoverished, uneducated, and lower class. Sofia is put in jail because of her refusal to participate in the social hierarchy of race when she insults the mayor's wife. Sofia is deprived of the right to raise her own children, because she must live in the mayor's house. The daughter of the mayor, Miss Eleanor Jane, relies on Sofia long after her sentence as a maid in the mayor's house is over. Sofia understands that she is only seeking salvation for the crimes of her parents and the privileged place in society that her skin color has given her: "Let her quit, say Sofia. It not my salvation she working for. And if she don't learn she got to face judgment for herself, she won't even have live" (286). Eleanor Jane's recognition of the obvious racism in the South is the first glimmer of hope for the readfer, showing that as time passes, attitudes change. Her relationship with Sofia also shows that to recognize the humanity in everyone, relationships must be formed across racial divides.

The oppression of a white, patriarchal religion is also present in the novel. Celie and Shug discuss the fairness of a white, male God, who has the inherent inability to connect

with them as black women. Celie has learned through experience that men are something to be feared, and her only model for God is male:

> From early adolescence into adulthood Celie associates the biblical God with the men she knows—men who have been oppressive and cruelly insensitive to her. The male-bullying and domination begin for Celie at fourteen when the man she thinks is 'Pa' rapes her on at least two occasions, rendering her unable to ever again bear children. (Hankison 321)

Celie's relationship with God is one of duality. Her only understanding of the Judeo-Christian God comes from a patriarchal image, therefore aligning him with the men who have abused her through the course of her life. Unfortunately, God is also the only person who will listen to her. She addresses her letters to God when her correspondence with Nettie is cut off. It is not until Celie can find her identity as a woman outside of the realm of patriarchal rules and judgment, that Celie can reassess her image of God and create a new religion of liberation.

The foundations of Christianity are built on a patriarchal system, beginning with the Creation story: women are made from men, and it is women who drive a wedge between humanity and paradise. God is presented as "the Father," and women are expected to pray to a man on the assumption that he would understand the needs and trials a woman faces. Celie reaches a full frustration when discussing the Christian God with Nettie:

> I don't write to God no more...he gave me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again...the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know.

> Trifling, forgitful, and lowdown...If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a better place. (193)

Celie spent the first half of the novel writing (and subsequently praying) to a God who never answered her, but only seemed to further the abuse and oppression she faced. For Celie removing Christianity from patriarchy is a difficult task: "...I'm still adrift. Trying to chase that old white man out of my head...Man corrupt everything...He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere" (198). The oppression of Southern Christianity is intrinsic because it is based on belief in a male God. Celie cannot participate in the religion of the South without allowing herself to be oppressed. She has only been taught to comply by her abusers: "It is Celie's interpretation of the biblical God and his commands that breeds her compliance to these abusive patriarchal conditions, for her acquiescence was apparently not an all-encompassing social norm...[her] adherence to traditional Christianity...keeps her locked in a cycle of male jurisdiction" (Hankison 322)**.** Thus Shug offers up the advice to abandon the connection with man and God in prayer: "Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost" (198). Shug offers Celie the chance to imagine a world without men, offering her a safe harbor in women, a reality Celie could never imagine as her life up until that point had pitted her against women as a means of survival.

Celie sees her struggle as something she must endure alone as the only female ally she has ever had no longer corresponds with her. She can only view other women as the enemy because of the patriarchal conditioning she has experienced: "Under the masculine

violence Celie is made to endure, a survival-of-the-fittest perspective had been implanted in her which pitted her against, rather than aligning her with, other women" (Hankison 326). It is not until Celie can find a safe-haven in a woman, Shug, that she can start to see women as allies, allowing her to ultimately come to terms with her own female body and reclaim the power that was taken from her by forceable violence. By removing the oppressive image of men from an intimate experience with God, Shug presents Celie with a religion removed from the oppression that has threatened to suffocate her.

Walker allows Celie and Shug to imagine a God that will not oppress the women, a kind creator who is both sexless and racially ambiguous, with no ties to a socioeconomic class. It is by freeing themselves from the constraints of a religion that by nature prescribes the subservience of women to men, that Celie and Shug are able to destroy the final layer of oppression. Shug offers an image of God that is based on a personal relationship with an intrinsic higher being:

> God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow, lord. Feeling like shit." (196)

Walker then brings the title into the discussion of God. For Shug it is about appreciating the beauty of nature: "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (197). There is something beautiful about noticing the wonder of something as simply complex as the color purple, and Shug seems to understand that this extraordinary creation is something to be admired and respected.

Because of the intrusiveness of the religious south, Celie will never be able to explore true freedom in loving a woman. Celie's love of a woman seems unfathomable for some of the characters. Harpo and Sofia assume that Celie's love of Shug is by accident or convenience: "They know I love Shug but they think womens love just by accident, anybody handy likely to do" (264). Part of their limited understanding comes from the time in which the book is set. The Christian religion the characters share expressly prohibits homosexuality: "...Celie is also confronted with the moral taboo of homosexuality imposed by the while, male, Christian God...Believing in this new god that accepts alternative lifestyles...Celie is free to venture into a lesbian relationship with Shug that for the first time merges sex and love for her" (Hankison 326). While Celie's relationship with Shug prompts her corporeal liberation, it creates a divide between her and her family. Sophia cannot fathom a lesbian relationship and as such dismisses it. Through their dismissal Harpo and Sofia show how Christianity touches everything in the South. However, their dismissal shows more support of Celie than a condemnation of her feelings, showing how deeply they care for Celie and what her happiness means to them.

In a surprising turn of events, it is Albert who offers up what he believes to be the true value and purpose of life: "I think us here to wonder...To wonder. To ast. And that in wondering bout the big things and asting bout the big things, you learn about the little ones, almost by accident...the more I wonder, he say, the more I love" (288). For Albert, life is about finding love through continually questioning, because without seeking knowledge, and better yet, understanding, humanity has the opportunity to end oppression for all people, regardless of sex, religion, or skin color. Because a creation as beautiful as (skin) color, is something to be revered, not a device to be used to enslave.

Walker makes a remarkable connection between the appreciation of the color purple and the value of black people in Southern society. As a former oppressor, Albert shows that change is possible in even the most unexpected places offering hope for the reader that change is possible.

Celie overcomes the oppression placed upon her through a reclaiming of her physical body. She is able to move past the years of abuse and find love by claiming her sexuality. Celie does not identify as a lesbian because this would not have been available to her considering the place and time in which she exists. Celie instead expresses her lack of sexual attraction to men by describing them as frogs, that stay frogs no matter how you kiss them. Celie struggles with her religion in the work and there is much exploration of the oppressive nature of a white, patriarchal Christianity. She offers an example for real women of what it means to reclaim one's body as a way of liberation.

CHAPTER 3

THE OPPRESSION OF "WHITE TRASH" IN THE WORK OF DOROTHY ALLISON

In *Trash*, a collection of short stories, Dorothy Allison writes to make sense of the tragedy that was her childhood as "poor white trash." There is some confusion when interpreting the work because the lines are blurry when deciding what is fiction and what is reality. It becomes hard to distinguish what Allison has experienced, especially when the unnamed narrator is telling stories from a childhood surrounded and defined by "trash." There is a consistency that threads through the stories: the narrator's physical oppression. When reading Allison's most famous work, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, it becomes clear that the stories in *Trash* had great influences on the novel. In both works, the reader sees a group of people who are physically oppressed, and eventually sees the protagonist find refuge from oppression in the world of women, and ultimately a reclaiming of the physical body through sexuality. The reason for the physical oppression of the characters is uniquely connected to their Southern roots, because of the unbreakable ties between patriarchy and Christianity in the South—men are the head of the household and are not to be questioned, even if they choose to beat, rape, and endanger those around them. To question either of these major institutions is to go against traditions that seem natural, leading the respective protagonists to live life as outcasts, and ultimate shun their mothers for the safety needed to survive.

In an interview with Carolyn Megan, Allison was asked several questions about her writing process. The interview took place while she was working on *Trash*, and Allison gave two answers that reveal a lot about the nature of the work. Megan asked Allison about the frustrations of her childhood and the relationships with her family. She said, "the hardest thing for me to understand was why my mother stayed in this bad, bad marriage with a brutal man. And it took me my whole life to begin to understand" (Megan 71-2). Allison could not understand her mother's motivations for staying with her abusive stepfather until having conversations with her aunts, much like the story "Don't Tell Me You Don't Know": "...seeing how powerfully caught they were in the things they were supposed to do...keep kids safe, find a good man, save him, and hang on for dear life. The concept of giving up and leaving was so alien to them. They believed that they could tame and heal the men in their lives with love'" (71-2). It becomes clear that Allison recognizes that the oppression she faced stemmed from the oppression her mother faced to only have one goal in life—marriage and motherhood—the same goal that would drive Bone's mother Annie to consistently place her children in a home with a physically and sexually abusive man.

This corporeal oppression is what defined women's lives in her family, especially in a place where what patriarchal society said was law. Especially in the Christ-haunted South, where God gave man domain over all, "...men's control of both women's sexual and reproductive lives and women's self-identity, self-respect, and self-esteem is the most fundamental of all the oppressions human beings visit on each other" (Feminist Thought 49). Because Allison's mother could expect nothing more of her life than to do as men dictated, she knew nothing more to expect of her daughter. The physical

oppression of child rearing and domestic labor was cyclical for these women, and the expectations of men constructed an entire world with blocks of oppression. Allison could not understand the oppression of herself or her family without writing. Allison writes to process her horrible past. Much like the consciousness raising groups mentioned in "Muscles of the Mind," Allison must have an emotional connection to develop trust and be able to share her stories with the reader: "women who feel comfortable with and trusting of one another first voice their personal experiences and then begin to see how they fit into the systems and structures of male domination and female subordination" (Bioethics 92). With the writing of these stories, Allison works to view her own oppression and how the system of patriarchy is at the root of it.

Allison made the decision to explore her past trauma and feelings through writing. She describes in the preface to *Trash* how she had manipulated "those horrible violent memories," making them "ironic and playful" (5). The rewriting of the stories was her personal catharsis, as she describes in the preface: "Writing it all down was purging. Putting those stories on paper took them out of the nightmare realm and made me almost love myself for being able to finally face them" (9). For Allison, it was the facing of her fear, her oppression, that finally set her free. Allison's protagonist Bone must face a similar struggle. Her reclaiming comes in the form of masturbatory fantasies in which she is beaten and raped by Daddy Glen. Unique from the adult narrator in *Trash*, Bone copes with her trauma as it is expected from a child: "Describing the impact of childhood abuse on character development, trauma specialist Elizabeth Waites explains how the childhood victim can develop a scapegoat identity or incorporate self-punitive behavior into her personality structure" (68). Bone uses these fantasies to transform herself from a victim

to a martyr. She claims control over her physicality by reliving the trauma in a sexualized fantasy that makes her a hero—she defies Daddy Glen by taking control of his abuse. While masochistic, her fantasies are important to her physical reclaiming. Bone cannot cope with the abuse without allowing herself the mastery of her own body. As long as Daddy Glen continues his abuse and control over her, she continues to seek out control in any form possible. In writing *Trash,* Allison is able to reclaim a similar ownership of her physical body that is stolen from her. By putting her trauma on paper, Allison is able to use the coping mechanism she understood best: "...writing allows us to define ourselves how we choose, with less concern of what others are going to think. In life, we are forced to conform, to some extent, to societal expectations; when writing, this conformity is less required" (Massey 18). Allison breaks many boundaries in *Trash*—class, sexuality, education—and the removal of each of these levels of oppression begins with understanding the horrible violence she witnessed and experienced as a child.

Just like the characters in *Trash*, those in *Bastard Out of Carolina* must deal with class oppression as well. They are further classified by their socioeconomic place within the town: "Through their oppositional behavior—the dangerous, antisocial behavior of the Boatwright men and the stubborn and sometimes nasty behavior of the women—the Boatwrights enact a socially scripted and stereotypical role: that of the shamelessly defiant and angry white trash poor" (Bouson 1). Bone is doomed from birth to the role of outcast in a patriarchal society. Her validity as a person is determined by the fact that she has no father—without a man to claim her she is worthless, a bastard—and that she belongs to the category of "white trash." Furthering her oppression and adding another class distinction, Bone is told from an early age that she is worthless in the Southern

patriarchal society because of her status as a bastard. While the women in her life fight to remove that label and the stigma that comes with it from Bone, she carries the implications of it throughout her life. From an early age, Bone's world is constructed around traditional gender roles, with expectations of how her biological sex will dictate her behavior and he relationships with those around her.

The most difficult relationships for each protagonist are with the women. Bone's family is built around a core of strong women who have grown to expect little from the men in their lives when it comes to child-rearing and financial support. This does not stop Bones' mother, Annie, from pursuing the fairy-tale romance and idealistic family that "normal" people have. While Annie has success by marrying the loving and paternal Lyle Parsons, his death ultimately leaves her to begin a relationship with Daddy Glen—a sweet-talking Southern man, with a nasty temper. Bone experiences corporeal oppression in the form of physical and sexual abuse at the hands of Daddy Glen, abuse Annie often chooses to ignore to keep her new family together. In *Trash,* Allison deals with the same dilemma in a world where women choose to ignore the violence around them and perpetuate the cycle by placing the expectation on their daughters that they too will one day raise a family identical to their own, another family of "trash."

From the first story in *Trash*, "River of Names" Allison creates a world entrenched in oppression through violence. Each of the children in the story, including the narrator, face an overwhelming amount of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. The narrator seems to be desensitized to the violence, listing violent episode after violent episode in a rapid-fire style that creates a disturbing picture. The violence first has the effect of numbing the reader to the sheer amount of brutal acts against innocent children, but then becomes

overwhelming with graphic description. One of the most grotesque scenes is one in which the narrator witnesses with her uncle and cousins involved in an act of unspeakable cruelty: “Little Bo came running out of the house, off the porch, feet first into his daddy’s arms. Uncle Matthew started swinging him like scythe, going after the bigger boys, Bo’s head thudding their shoulders, their hips. Afterward, Bo crawled around in the dirt, the blood running out of his ears and his tongue hanging out of his mouth...” (Allison 14). This scene shows the true nature of what it meant for the narrator to grow up as “trash,” and the sickening violence and abuse that was an everyday occurrence in such a world.

Upon further inspection, the episodes of abuse detailed give some insight into how Allison was affected by the abuse in her past. While the violence described is brutal and gut-wrenching, the moments Allison skirts over are the most disconcerting. Some of the worst violence is vividly described, but it is the images left to the imagination of the reader which seem to have harmed the narrator the most. The narrator describes a violent episode with her stepfather after the children have gotten in trouble in minimalistic language, offering nothing but pleas for her stepfather to stop the unthinkable:

> ‘Yes, Daddy.’
>
> ‘No, Daddy.’
>
> ‘I’m sorry, Daddy.’
>
> ‘Don’t do that, Daddy.’
>
> ‘Please, Daddy.’ (39)

While previous episodes are descriptively detailed, the episode of her stepfather leaves out all details and consists only of her dialogue to her father, seemingly in response to his actions, be they sexual or physical abuse. Throughout “Mama,” where this episode

occurs, when there is an episode of violence or abuse, the narrator repeats something similar to a mantra: “Push it down. Don’t show it. Don’t tell anyone what is really going on. We are not safe. There are people in the world who are, but they are not us. Don’t show your fear to anyone. The things that would happen are too terrible to name” (39). With this mantra, the narrator shows she has learned that the best way to deal with the abuse is to ignore it, because no one really wants to know what happened, a lesson repeated in “Gospel Song.”

Allison’s story “Gospel Song” explores the corrupt and hypocritical nature of Christianity in the South. The narrator befriends an albino girl named Shannon whose parents are traveling evangelists. “Early descriptions of Shannon compare her to a type of Jesus figure. She is an albino and therefore all white—symbolic of purity. Reminiscent of Jesus’s story, her appearance and ‘pureness’ make her stand out and invite public ridicule and mockery” (Lakostik 59). Through Shannon, she is exposed to a dualistic world where people are being washed of their sins in mass baptisms, while simultaneously, adults and children are running around the camps drunk on stolen whiskey. Both girls are harassed at the religious gatherings by boys attempting to fondle them. When the narrator brings her concern’s to Shannon’s mother she simply dismisses them: “Certainly sin didn’t touch them the way it did Shannon and me. Both of us had learned to walk carefully backstage, with all those hands reaching out to stroke our thighs and pinch the nipples we barely had yet” (58). The dismissiveness seems to be a distinctive quality in the “trash” community making it particularly alarming. If such action is merely “boys being boys,” then any other accusations brought forth by the girls, such as abuse or rape, could be dismissed as manipulative stories. The patriarchal society has given the boys the power

and excuse for such invasive behavior, harming both the boys and girls. The girls have to learn quickly in such an atmosphere that their body is their own, until a boy, because such curiosity is healthy for a boy's development, decides he wants it for his own purposes.

In both works, the world of women is one of duality for the protagonists. The unnamed narrator in *Trash* finds oppression in the arms of her mother, but a safe haven in the arms of her female lovers. The same is true for Bone. Her mother chooses to remain blind to her abuse and it is only her aunt who finally offers her a home and freedom from her abuser: "...Allison interweaves graphic scenes of Bone's abuse with episodes of respite and safety in which Bone stays with members of her extended family, such as her Aunt Ruth or her Aunt Raylene. Bone, who feels consumed by shame, finds some relief in her relationship with Aunt Ruth, who tells Bone stories about her family—a potentially healing act in Allison's novel." Bone can only find safety with a woman who has shunned traditionally patriarchal relationships and lives out life on her own. She can only escape the cyclical nature of corporeal oppression by leaving the patriarchal world to live on the river bank with her Aunt.

Stemming further from her experience with trauma, the narrator's relationship with her family is one of disappointment and unfair expectations. The narrator cannot give her family what they expect from her, the expectations constructed by a patriarchal, Christian society. She is not married, only has exclusive relationships with women (which is unknown to her family), and has yet to produce the children that are expected of a woman with a working womb. Because of her perceived failings as a southern woman, the narrator has a strained relationship with her family. In the story "Don't Tell Me You Don't Know," her aunt comes to visit her, upset, and demanding that the narrator attempt

to reconnect with her mother. It is within this story that the true extent of the abuse she faced from her stepfather, and its ongoing consequences for the narrator, are revealed to the reader:

> Some people never do have babies, you know. Some people get raped at eleven by their stepfather their mama half hates but can't afford to leave. Some people then have to lie and hide it 'cause it would make so much trouble. So nobody will know, not the law and not the rest of the family. Nobody but the women supposed to be the ones who take care of everything, who know what to do and how to do it, the women who make children who believe in them and trust in them, and sometimes die for it. Some people never go to a doctor and don't find out for ten years that the son of a bitch gave them some goddamned disease (105-6).

The unnamed narrator's past sexual trauma leaves her unable to bear children, another point of contention between her and her mother. Like Celie in *The Color Purple*, her status as a "broken" woman makes her appear as lesser to her mother who still operates under the patriarchal ideology that women must reproduce to be successful. The narrator touches on the responsibility that comes with being a southern woman, because they are "supposed to be the ones who take care of everything" (105). Unknowingly the narrator describes the impossible situation her mother and the other women of her family were placed in to provide for their children, relying on abusive men to provide what they would be unable to as single women with no marketable job skills or experience. It is because of the extensive abuse from her stepfather, and her mother's inability to leave him, that the narrator is unable to have children. It is her place in the world of "trash"—a world of cyclical oppression—that made such abuse acceptable, and it is her same place

as a woman in the south, that creates the expectation of a child which she cannot give, because of such abuse.

As the story progresses she becomes more open with her lovers and her family, showing a progression in Allison's healing and subsequently, her ability to connect on an emotional level with the people who are trying to love her. In a scene of familial bonding, the narrator visits her mother, who has fixed some biscuits. The narrator recounts her mother's reaction to her eating: "'It's good to watch you eat,' my mama smiled at me, around her loose teeth. 'It's so good to watch you eat'" (Allison 155). As expected behavior of a southern woman, "her mother enacts appropriate 'feminine' behavior in her relation to food; she herself does not eat, and instead takes pleasure in feeding her family" (Jarvis 778). Even in old age, her mother cannot escape the oppressive forces that control her life, seeking fulfillment in feeding her children. The closer Allison moves toward a human connection, through understanding the oppression of herself and generations of women like her mother before her, the closer she comes to reclaiming emotional self, and becoming whole again.

The trauma of her past and Allison's unwavering ability to face even the most horrifying events are what make the stories of *Trash* so memorable. Toni, in a moment of grotesque foreshadowing, gave the narrator (or more likely Allison) the gift that saved her: "Shit, girl, it's just too much, too Southern Gothic--catfish and monkeys and chewed-off fingers. Throw in a little red dirt and chicken feathers, a little incest and shotgun shells, and you could join the literary tradition" (Allison 87). Toni could not have known that everything she sought to add to Allison's stories (even the incest) was already waiting to be told, or that by placing such stories in a collection and eventually her

groundbreaking novel *Bastard out of Carolina*, Allison would solidify her place in the literary tradition. While the journey through both works is a difficult one to take, there is a clear emotional growth that Allison experiences when reclaiming her corporeal self, and it makes the stories overwhelmingly sad, but cathartic for the reader. Allison succeeds in reclaiming herself with the last lines of *Trash*: "Mama's whole attention remained fixed on that song until the pupil of the right eye finally filled up with blood and blacked out. Even then we held on. We held Mama's stilled shape between us. We held her until she set us free" (219). Only when the beginnings of her oppression—her mother and with her the burdensome customs and expectations of a generation—had died, could she truly be free.

CHAPTER 4

RACE, CLASS, SEXUALITY, AND THE GOSPEL IN *KILLERS OF THE DREAM*

Lillian Smith explores the connection between Christianity, racism, and oppressed sexuality in her work *Killers of the Dream*. She discusses the indoctrination of prejudice and fear in her childhood: "We were taught...to love God, to love our white skin, and to believe in the sanctity of both. We learned at the same time to fear God...we were also learning to fear a power that was in our body and to fear dark people who were everywhere around us..." (Smith 83). Oppression in the South was based out of a fear of race, a fear of God, and a fear of the body and the sins it could commit. The most terrifying of these was the female body and its hidden sexuality, creating a culture of oppression intended to "protect" Southern women. The clear oppression of the female body runs throughout the work, and the oppression is based out of a white, Christian, patriarchal society. Christianity runs deep with patriarchy in the South, offering justification for the oppression of women from the first book. This religion is intrinsic, and Smith works to break down the barriers that surround women in a Southern society, beginning with the religious system that is innately oppressive of women. Smith's work offers a chance for women to be subversive to the system of patriarchy that creates the basis of all female oppression: Christianity.

Smith's early life, while seemingly not extraordinary, set the stage for her contribution to the Southern cannon: "she was born in 1897 in the north Florida town of

Jasper, the seventh child of a prosperous businessman and his well-born wife, [however] by her late teens Smith was set on a course different from that of most southern women" (Hobson). Her place in an upper-class, white family gave her a unique perspective of the world around her, placing her as a silent observer to the injustices she saw happening to those around her. Smith, while disadvantaged as a female, was able to avoid much of the oppression witnessed around her, giving her the unique opportunity to see how such prejudice was continued. It was not here say that shaped her opinions of the cycles of oppression, but rather the words from her own mother's lips and the lessons learned from children raised in similar circumstances that gave her insight to how the next generation of oppressors was cultivated. Her position also gave her the opportunity of an education, later put to use to question the instances of oppression that deeply troubled her.

Smith's true understanding of oppression was revealed later in her life as she began to speak openly about her sexual orientation. For Smith, her position as an outsider in her Southern town gave her the unique opportunity to witness oppression at a distance, developing sympathy with those oppressed. While she could not address the grievances against her because of her homosexuality, she could openly ridicule the South for its racism and stubborn clinging to a tradition of oppression:

> ...her sexual identity was a major factor in the making of Smith as an audacious racial commentator. If she could not speak openly and personally on one forbidden subject, homosexuality, she would speak all the more boldly on another, integration. Her double detachment from the centers of southern power—not only as a woman but as a lesbian—contributed to a perspective that allowed

> her to feel, in a manner white heterosexual liberals never could, the pain of prejudice of any kind. (Hobson)

Smith's unique perspective comes across in the passionate words of her work. She does not hold back in her criticisms and uses her understanding of the culture to write unabashedly about the injustices perpetuated there, and the thousands of people who continued to stand silently by and allow such oppression to continue.

Killers of the Dream challenges many oppressive institutions of the South including race, class, sexuality, and religion. Like Marilyn Frye's theory of oppression as a bird cage of connected wires, Smith focuses on examining the interconnected nature of oppression and makes a direct call to Southerners to challenge the prejudice championed every day by the dominant classes: "The South she describes is virtually a nightmare society, a civilization nearly as dark as that portrayed by Hawthorne when he looked back at the Puritan New England of his ancestors, with its frights and ghosts and demons" (Hobson). One of the most haunting events in the work takes place at a summer camp when the young campers choose to put on a morality play. Each of them take on various identities and begin to question some of the normal social stratifications they witness in everyday life. The most outspoken voice in the play is that of "Southern Tradition" which polices the children when their behaviors stray from expectation. The most chilling of the instances of policing occurs when the children question why they can not play with children of different skin colors, concluding that while Southern Tradition says they cannot, Love says they can (50). Smith identifies a clear villain and instigator of the close-minded behavior that is driving the current systems of oppression: Christianity.

Throughout the work, the culprit behind the motivation of the members of her community is consistently cited as Christianity.

Socioeconomic class is criticized as a means of oppression in Smith's examination of "Southern white trash." These people are looked down upon by the members of her community as second-class citizens. As a child, Smith is not allowed to play with the "trashy" children, just as she is not allowed to play with the black children. Smith identifies a division between the "white trash" and black communities, giving examples where those people who were considered "white trash" often participated most actively in outspoken acts of prejudice. Smith observed these women as keepers of tradition. Because they have nothing else to cling to, they remain strong in their beliefs and continue the cycle of oppression by raising their children with the same beliefs. These women rarely challenge society, seeking to find respect from the community because of their steadfast hold to tradition, refusing to challenge those in superior positions.

Women are a special discussion in the novel through the role they serve in raising their children to continue prejudice, and how they reaffirm oppression as an acceptable institution. The idea of "Southern womanhood" is particularly important to Smith because of the experiences with her own mother that shaped her worldview. While Smith is accusatory of these women, she does explain their behavior for the reader stating, "I do not think our mothers were aware they were teaching us lessons..." (Smith 83). Regardless of their ignorance, these women perpetuated the cycle of oppression by instilling in their children a sense of fear and a list of rules to help them avoid danger. The rules and fears of Southern children were taught at an early age and stemmed from a "healthy" fear of God and the dangers of skin color and sexuality:

> By the time we were five years old we had learned, without hearing words, that masturbation is wrong and segregation is right, and each had become a dread taboo that must never be broken, for we believed God, whom we feared and tried desperately to love, had made the rules concerning not only Him and our parents, but our bodies and Negroes." (Smith 84)

Smith paints a vivid picture of a deeply rooted shame culture instilled in very young children by their mothers. Each child was sculpted to further the oppression of others, while simultaneously furthering their own experience of oppression. A fear of God and his retribution prevented the children from questioning their mothers as the lessons were "taught us by our mother's voice, memorized with her love, patted into our lives as she rocked us to sleep" (Smith 84). Lessons that seem outrageous by today's standards were taught with love and affection, making it easier to understand how such blind racism could continue for decades. Children taught to respect God and their parents, were simultaneously taught that the rules given to them were created for their own protection and that violating them meant disregarding the love used to teach them such dangerous ideologies.

Using another personal story to convey her point, Smith recounts the weeks her friend Janie lived in the house with her and her family. Janie was found wandering in a black neighborhood and was taken to live with the Smith family, because she appeared to be white. After it comes to light that Janie is indeed black, she is quickly shipped out of the house leaving Smith to question the difference between her and Janie:

> "...Mother said gently, 'Janie is a little colored girl.'
>
> 'But she's white!'

‘We were mistaken. She is colored.’

‘But she looks—’

‘She is colored. Please don’t argue!’

‘What does it mean?’ I whispered.

‘It means,’ Mother said slowly, ‘that she has to live in Colored Town with colored people.’” (Smith 36)

While Janie’s skin color is white, white enough for Smith to be confused by her mother’s declarations, for her mother she is still black and can not remain in the house with her children. This scene marks an important moment in Smith’s understanding of race: it was not something just superficial, but something that went deeper than the skin, much like the racism she would continue to question for the rest of her life. For many Southerners, including Smith’s mother, the idea of blackness was something biological and inherent. In the end, Janie’s skin color was unimportant. It was the fact that she had “black blood” that placed her in the place of inferiority.

Instances like that of the loss of her friend Janie, drove Smith to examine the implications of such attitudes and their origins. She used a brutal lens to examine the injustices she witnessed. Smith “insist[ed] that her book was about more than race; it was about the psychological health of the culture. Throughout the work, the language of psychology competed with that of religion; if racism was ‘evil,’ it was also ‘disease’” (Hobson). Describing racism as a disease suggested to the reader that it was curable, giving hope that knowledge, understanding and a willingness to let go of some remnants of Southern tradition, could give way to a new and necessary world where people were no longer judged on the color of their skin, and eventually their sexual preferences. Smith

recounts the lesson taught to her and her peers about their bodies: "...the body itself is a Thing of Shame and you must never show its nakedness to anyone except the doctor when you are sick" (Smith 87). The shame culture extended to the body, making the point that it is inherently bad and exploration of it could lead to damnation.

Smith's condemnation of Southern mothers does not come without her examination of their creation. She posits: "Who long ago made Mom and her sex 'inferior' and stripped her of her economic and political and sexual rights?...Man, born of woman, has found it a hard thing to forgive her for giving him birth" (Smith 153). Smith's question shows a clear duality in the power stratification she witnessed as a child: while women are the source of life for men, men still seek to force them to bend to their will and seek to control them by placing themselves in a position of power. In their place of superiority, men are the largest proponents in keeping the system of oppression in place. Especially in the South, the power of patriarchy is intensified through the doctrine of Christianity, which from the creation story creates the "natural order" of the male as leader of society: "White men were the primary killers of Smith's dream of racial and sexual equality in the South—it was quite literally the sins of the fathers about which she spoke" (Hobson). Smith attests to the oppression depicted in the work of Walker and Allison by giving a direct source of the oppression faced by the women in the region where the women chose to set their works. By placing themselves in power and creating a religious system whose omnipotent ruler is depicted as one of them, white males have a unique opportunity to make the claim that their power stems from divine right as they were created in God's image. When women, especially black women, do not meet either of these criteria to be considered Godly, the oppression they face then becomes completely about their physical

body. The color of their skin and their genitalia give enough reason for them to be regarded as second-class citizens in the 1940s South.

Smith used her years spent in the South to speak out against a culture that only an insider could understand. By taking a stand against the egregious institutions of prejudice and racism, Smith challenged the old order and called for a reexamination of the stubborn, wild beast that is Southern tradition: "The great purpose of her work was to demolish walls, barriers between people; and racism and sexism as well as distinctions of class and religion built those walls. Her crusade against racism, then, was part of a larger struggle against needless separation of any kind" (Hobson). Smith's call to action presented a unique opportunity to examine other institutions of oppression. From her calling out of racism, it became possible to examine the oppression of people based on their gender and sexuality. While Smith could never be open about her argument for a Southern understanding of homosexuality in 1949, her work placed the South under a microscope, giving a small girl from Florida the chance to use her voice, and eventually claim her physical body as her own.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

While these works were set in a different time period (ranging from the 1930s to the 1950s), their stories can still offer some hope to modern women who experience oppression everyday. Through the application of Grosz's theory to these works, it becomes clear that a woman's main source of oppression—her body—can also become her main source of empowerment, an idea demonstrated in these novels. It is through the examination of her work and these novels that a more unified version of feminism can be posited, and the divisions in class, race, sex and gender can be brought together to form a feminism that defines us all. Because "dichotomous thinking necessarily hierarchizes and ranks the two polarizing terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart," the body is often considered beneath the mind (consequently women are associated with the body, as they are always placed in subordination to the more desirable trait) (Grosz 3). This association with the body leads to a devaluing of the female body, and an understanding that men have the right to exert their superiority in acts of physical and sexual violence, a undeniable truth of the lives of Celie, Bone, and the unnamed narrator.

Celie struggles with a seemingly insurmountable amount of oppression. She embodies the lowest of every possible dichotomy, leaving her an easy target for abuse from the men around her. Celie is used sexually for her step-father's pleasure, but is

ultimately deemed worthless first for her inability to bear children, and then for her inability to parent Albert's children. Reproduction is used as a weapon against her, seeking to physically oppress her in the way she is most unlike her male abusers: her ability to birth children. Her relationship with God is both tumultuous and inherent because of her life in the South. Celie must reclaim religion for herself and create an image of a compassionate and loving God, different from the white patriarchal depictions of the Southern churches that represented the years of abuse she suffered at the hands of men and the life she could never achieve as a black woman in the South during the 1930s. The most important reclaiming for Celie, however, is that of her body. With the help of Shug Avery, Celie is able to equate sex with love and to seek empowerment through her sexual pleasure. When Celie finds strength and fulfillment in herself, she also finds her self-reliance and creates a business and life for herself in a community of supportive women.

Allison struggles to escape the effects of her abuse because of the extensiveness of the oppression it has caused. The elements of Allison's life—abuse, poverty, lack of love—work together to keep her oppressed. Only when Allison deals with each of the factors can she begin to break the forces that are working together to enchain her. It is in Allison's writing that she begins to explore the horrors of her past and remove the factors of oppression that were forced upon her from birth. Both the unnamed narrator and Bone must struggle through many facets of oppression. Because of the sexual trauma they have experienced, each seeks out what was then seen as a "deviant" form of sexuality to take power over their bodies and their experience. In her masturbatory fantasies, Bone can rewrite her episodes of abuse where she is in control and allowing spectators to witness

her courage in the face of pure evil. The narrator seeks out lesbian relationships, relearning what it means to love other women, and finding relationships free from the pressures of violation and procreation that were attached to the male relationships in her life.

Lillian Smith criticizes many institutions in the South including parenting, racism, and Christianity. While Smith never recounts any instances of sexual abuse, it was clear to her that her sexual orientation placed her in the position of outsider from her community, her family, and from God. Smith argues for an end to the blind and senseless hatred perpetuated by figures of authority in the South and turned the nation's eye to a region infamously slow to change. Smith reclaims her body by refusing to adhere to the rules about her body laid out by her mother and by pointing out the direct ties between a shame of the body to the value and purported superiority of white skin. Lillian Smith chose never to have children, a courageous choice in a time where the worth of a woman was determined by her ability to procreate. Her unwavering critique gives a voice to the oppressed from a vantage point of duality that other critiques could not achieve. Her place as a Southern writer presented her with the tools and understanding of a culture often closed to the outside world, giving her the ability to call for an end to a century-old form of oppression.

Considering these works, the female body becomes an important resource for political change. Grosz calls for a move toward a corporal feminism, a feminism on and of the body. A feminism focused on the body brings a new resource into discussions that has often been neglected because of its rank of inferiority to the mind. Each of these women give hope to a reclaiming of the body through their historically subversive behaviors to

the systems that perpetuated their oppression. The oppression of women starts on the female body and this makes it a powerful tool. If it is so easily inscribed with pressures of the outside world to alter and shape the psyche, it then has the same potential to be easily inscribed with a new schema of a body that works with the mind instead of being controlled by it. Women have an abundance of power in the very bodies that are being used as an avenue of oppression against them. For the characters in these works, and perhaps for future generations of women, it is the tapping into this power that will redefine what it means to be gendered and what it means to be a female body.

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